

A THOUSAND STEPS AROUND ME: A STUDY OF DISCOVERING METAPHOR  
THROUGH MANIPULATING REPETITION IN DANCE

by

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## STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

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## ABSTRACT

This research presents questions and ideas about repetition and metaphor. It addresses the question: What is it about repetition that drives home a point, unravels ideas and opinions, and creates metaphor and connection to lived experiences?

The thesis explores a very personal experience of dysfunctional repetition and the journey of using productive repetition to break that cycle. This allowed me to reflect upon who I was before this experience and the process of discovering my missing self and capabilities afterwards.

In various chapters, I reflect upon the tools used in the creative process to facilitate metaphor through repetition and gesture. I explore personal metaphors that arose throughout the creation and the lessons learned from experiencing these metaphors. Finally, I share how this process has changed me as a person and the impact it will have on my artistic journey throughout this life.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Why Am I Doing This?

“What if where you are, is what you need?”  
- Deborah Hay

I was brought up on Disney movies, the ones that professed true love, fairytales, and perfect endings. My understanding of love, and ultimately life, was formed and semi-cemented by these discourses. My entire childhood was centered on finding my own “happily ever after.” Even into my early teen years, I held onto the idea of a perfect ending, daydreaming about how my life would turn out. I remember, as a teenager and even a young adult, watching dance with this little girl’s mentality, living in a fairytale through the viewing of these dances. I started to connect “happily ever after” with dance because it was such a huge part of my life and because I seemed to be a natural mover. Dance just came easy to me. As I continued to grow and progress in my own dance career, I began to live my fairytale and experience my long sought “happily ever after.” Five years ago, however, that fairytale came to an abrupt end.

My body throbbed. The room was dark. I was waking up from my final surgery to remove a tumor that had invaded my body for the past 9 months. I had endured two painful surgeries in 2 weeks. Within those 2 weeks, I had also endured numerous tests

and diagnoses, undergone various treatments, and faced the reality that although I could have my life back, it would never be the same. Physically, I was a different person. My left arm had been the focus of many of the surgeries and was rendered useless. The path I thought my life would take was inevitably altered. My dance career was halted, from my perspective, finished. I faced endless months of physical therapy and I truly believed I would never dance again. Emotionally, I was faced with issues of mortality and the possibility of never knowing who I could have been. This one experience propelled me into a downward spiral of self-destruction. My self confidence and my experience of “happily ever after” were crushed and I began to live my life as a shadow of the person I once had been. I was so focused on the loss of the person I was before my illness that I never really believed I could or would be a better person because of this life-altering occurrence.

The processes of creating *Grains of Time* and writing this thesis have proven me wrong. Only recently have I begun to see the power that lies in second chances. I have no doubt that I would have achieved all my dreams had I not had this illness but because of the illness and the journey this thesis has presented me, I have met and exceeded my dreams professionally and personally. This second chance has shown me that my capabilities are infinite. I just have to believe in the power of who I am.

Because dance has been such a major part of my existence, many of my life’s most important lessons have been experienced, understood, and learned through the metaphorical movement therein. Almost every memory I have, every sprinkle of understanding that has come, every “ah ha” moment unveiled to me has been through viewing, experiencing, and sharing dance. Although I had ample opportunity to develop



other abilities, I continue to return to dance. This was my first real cycle of repetition. Therefore, I have used the manipulation of repetition in dance to explore the nature of re-connecting with lived experiences to learn many of my life's metaphors. I had three goals as I embarked on my research: First, because of the prominent theme of repetition in my life, I sought to use repetition in movement as the catalyst for metaphor and connection to lived experiences. Second, I hoped to drive myself to create a piece that would not only open my eyes to more of life's lessons but that would prove to make me a better person in the process. And third, I wanted to research and present something that would teach me more about my past experiences and how they reveal my true capable self.

A few months after my final surgery, I found myself drenched in anger. I had worked my entire life to build a dance career and pursue my creative interests through movement. The illness that I endured temporarily took all of that hard work and accomplishment away from me. My body was different. My understanding of life was different. I felt that something special had been stolen from me and I had no say in the matter. Because I was dwelling on the tragedy of the situation, I did not realize that I actually had complete control of the outcome. Instead, I lived my life in a cycle of repetition. Every time I took a step forward, I unconsciously told myself to take 10 steps back, reminiscing on who I was before and the idea that I would never be that person again. It was a repetitive cycle that subconsciously consumed every decision I made.

This thesis reflects upon this specific personal experience that has led me to who I am today, unfolding a repetitive pattern within my life, my creative process, and my understanding of dance. The first chapter is a brief introduction of the ideas surrounding my work and writing. The second chapter focuses on my personal definition of metaphor,

repetition in our lives, and how they connect to present personal metaphor. In Chapter 3, I articulate my experience in creating *Grains of Time* and how I came to understand myself through the process. The conclusion, Chapter 4, shares specific metaphors that have surfaced and how they have affected my life. I divulge the personal implications of this thesis process and the impact on my future as an artist.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE METAPHOR OF REPETITION

#### Defining Metaphor

I hear, I forget.  
I see, I remember.  
I do, I understand.  
- Confucius

For the purpose of my research and writing, I define metaphor as a process by means of which one thing is made to represent another thing. For me, the movement of a dancer's body, gesture, and repetition are symbolic of actual language, allowing for personal metaphor, interpretation, and meaning.

My experience in graduate school, like life, has been anything but smooth. In many ways, both physically and metaphorically, I have been walking in circles. As I mentioned in the introduction, I dealt with an illness that took dance away from me and even now, it is hard to believe that I have been given a second chance to do what fulfills me, what makes me whole. About a year after my final surgery, a previous dance mentor contacted me about a part-time teaching position. I would have the opportunity to teach at the University from which I graduated, presenting beginning courses in the dance minor and major. I was in somewhat of a dark place when I received his call. I was metaphorically at the bottom of the barrel. It was my mother who convinced me to take

the position. Although I had found my way back to dance, I constantly struggled with confidence and direction, as I never really believed I could dance, create, perform, or teach as I had before. This teaching experience led me to auditioning for graduate school, which set me on the path to creating *Grains of Time* and understanding the power within myself. All the while, I was traveling in circles. I would do something that would bring me to the upper curve of a circle where I felt good and capable of what was being asked of me only to find myself slipping down to the bottom of the circle, uncertain of who I was and what I was competent of doing. So, as I began the creative process of this thesis experience, I did what felt most natural, I walked in circles. Only as I continued to do so did I feel empowered and eventually gain a new understanding of where I had come from and where I was going.

David Punter (2007), a professor of English literature at the University of Bristol shares the following words about metaphor:

If all language [including dance] is metaphorical, or at least invested with a certain metaphorical potential, then it could also follow that we might want to say that all language is continually involved in a series of acts of translation. (p. 3)

Inherent in art is the use of the language of metaphor to communicate an idea, an emotion, a question, or concern. Thus, art has the capacity for tremendous communicative power and can allow for ample opportunity to translate it personally. By viewing something with no verbal explanation, we are left to our own devices and experiences to interpret what we are seeing or experiencing. Metaphor uses symbolism and imagery to express an idea. It is a lens through which subject matter is enlivened and infused with meaning based on our personal experiences.

As a mover, I am particularly interested in movement as a form of metaphorical communication. To a great extent, humans perceive and interpret others through body language. Dancers use the body and bodies in relationship to one another in time, space, and energy as metaphor. The metaphors created through dance expressively animate ideas regarding the nature of our sense of self and our relationships with others. The act of dancing is a significantly metaphoric and meaning-making experience not only for viewers but also dancers.

Often, when I teach improvisation classes, I have students repeat gestures and phrases multiple times: First, so they feel comfortable with the movement. Second, so they start to understand and create meaning from the movement. I then allow them time to talk about what the movement meant to them and how it increased their understanding of themselves and the world. Robert and Janet Denhart (2006), in their book, *The Art of Leadership* say, “We see the world through the lens of our individuality and those personal experiences that have shaped who we are” (p. 87).

George Lakoff, a linguist, and Mark Johnson, a philosopher, suggest that metaphors not only make our thoughts more vivid and interesting, they actually structure our perceptions and understandings (2003). We read each other’s bodies to understand what they are saying and how and when to approach them. I find this intriguing as we watch a performance where we will not physically interact with the dancer but rather read them to know what we understand about them and ourselves.

The metaphors that arose for me throughout this process are very personal. They represent things I have experienced and who I really am. I would like to propose that metaphor is a vocabulary for connecting what we are experiencing now with what we

have experienced before. Twyla Tharp (2003) believes that “it’s not only how we express what we remember, it’s how we interpret it – for ourselves and others” (p. 64).

Metaphor is extremely important in our lives as meaning making is what drives our society forward. If we do not understand or learn from the experiences we have had and the metaphors that arise from them, we will not progress as a population. It would be nearly impossible to evolve past the obvious in each circumstance, which would keep us in the same place, experiencing the same things day after day. Up until this thesis process, I was in this cycle. I did not face the metaphors and lessons presented through my illness and the change of my mind and body. I did not make meaning from all that had happened to me and it was holding me back from becoming more than I ever thought I could be. Only through the metaphors presented in the process of creating *Grains of Time* did I discover this fault and begin to rectify it.

Robert and Janet Denhardt (2006) present the idea that,

Artists connect by fashioning images, symbols, and metaphors that appeal to an intelligence far different from that of intellect. They employ a language that carries strong emotional power or ascendancy, a language that speaks to the human spirit. They connect by relating to those primal human experiences of “stories” that we all [experience]. (p. 79)

In the book, *The Remembered Self: Emotion and Memory in Personality*, the authors, Jefferson Singer and Peter Salovey (1993) claim, “the self is a collection of every single memory of all the events in one’s life. We focus upon, record, and store in memory a copy of everything that happens to us, important or unimportant, profound or trivial” (p. 121). I have come to believe that this is true. We are who we are because of what we have experienced. And I believe, because of my personal involvement in and

understanding of dance, that we can become more aware of that through experiencing, viewing, and understanding metaphor in movement.

### Repetition

We are repetitive beings. We repeat things both unconsciously as well as consciously. Our heart beat, our breath pattern, and the need to nourish ourselves daily set a pattern of repetition as an essence of who we are as human beings. Repetition creates a pattern, which consequentially and naturally captures our attention. Repetition often generates familiarity. What at first may be strange, after repeated exposure becomes clear and understandable. Or, on the other hand, what is familiar and clear, through repetition can become bizarre and unrecognizable. Repetition has the power to take us in many different directions of understanding and can have many different meanings at different times in our lives. In my past, because of my illness, repetition was dysfunctional. It was a source of negativity, a cycle that never let me see my full potential. It controlled me. Today, it has helped me overcome fear, obstacles, and ultimately myself to unveil my true capabilities and self.

In speech, we repeat to make sure we have been heard correctly. In learning, we repeat in order to make clear the concepts being explored. We also use repetition to imbed ideas into the very soul as in ritual or religious practices. In daily activities, we repeat because it gives us structure and understanding of the world around us.

Everywhere around us, we see, hear and experience repetition. All of existence is based on a pulse of repetitions; the beating of the heart, the rhythm of the day, the recurrent need of the body for food or for sleep. Everyday life is repetition. Ritual, prayer, meditation are based on repetition... "the time of repetition is sacred time" (Bishop Jan Lindhardt). (Hove, 2010, p. 104)

Repetition is a condition of life to which we, as human beings, are forced to relate.

Psychologist Henrik Høgh-Olesen (Høve, 2010) from Aarhus University emphasizes that every development is based on repetition:

If you can get beyond the immediate boredom threshold and continue into a state of immersion in the process, doors will be opened to brand new layers of experience. Through repetition you reach deeper levels than any number of new infatuations can ever give. (p. 105)

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (Høve, 2010) pointed out something similar. He used the concept of repetition in the ideal state that can be achieved by choosing concrete everyday life and being fully present in the whole sequence of moments in life. If we are fully present, we can reach a level of meditation that can then present metaphors that give new meaning to lived experiences. He says, “We must let go of our fear of monotony and follow the pattern where one can truly feel the magic of repetition” (p. 105).

Along with dance, music has also been a major part of my life. I started playing the piano when I was 5 years old and took lessons for 12 years. Repetition is a major element of music training and composition. When starting my research for using repetition in movement, I looked to two musicians in particular for ideas on using repetition well: Phillip Glass and John Adams. On the website of Phillip Glass it says,

The new musical style that Glass was evolving was eventually dubbed “minimalism.” Glass himself never liked the term and preferred to speak of himself as a composer of “music with repetitive structures.” Much of his early work was based on the extended reiteration of brief, elegant melodic fragments that wove in and out of an aural tapestry. Or, to put it another way, it immersed a listener in a sort of sonic weather that twists, turns, surrounds, develops. ([www.philipglass.com/bio.php](http://www.philipglass.com/bio.php))

John Adams said,



Rather than set up small engines of motivic materials and let them run free in a kind of random play of counterpoint, I used the fabric of continually repeating cells to forge large architectonic shapes, creating a web of activity that, even within the course of a single movement, was more detailed, more varied, and knew both light and dark, serenity and turbulence. (earbox.com)

These two quotes led me to believe that repetition in art increases sensitivity to small variations. Repetition is the underlying beat that you can play against, just as you do in music. Deviation requires regularity in order to have something to deviate from. This means that repetition is extremely complex. It may seem simple and primary but it is also deep and intricate. It can be thought of as a part of a quest for perfection and the regulations it imposes enable us to focus on a singular path of attaining perfection. But there is a fine line when using repetition. Helle Hove (2010) says, “Repetition is dangerous. Repetition is debasing. It means, I did it all the same...” (p. 103). It is a difficult line not to cross. But when done correctly, repetition can be powerful and can open an array of possibilities.

Steven Connor (1998) identifies repetition as “a central and necessary concept within all attempts to understand individual and social being” (p. 1). In *Telling it Again and Again*, Bruce Kavin (1972) argues, “repetition can lock us into the compulsive insatiability of neurosis, or free us into the spontaneity of the present tense; it can strengthen an impression, create a rhythm, flash us back, or start us over; it can take us out of time completely” (p. 5).

Repetition can provide new ways of perceiving and interpreting human relationships and the relationships we have with ourselves. Doris E. Cohan (2008), renowned psychologist and psychotherapist, says that “at an unconscious level, we repeat patterns, playing out themes in various ways so that we can experience emotions attached

to those patterns again and again” (p. 3). As stated in the previous chapter, we want to connect and reconnect with past-lived experiences in order to remember what we have learned from them. This is what intrigues me most about repetition, that it holds the power to help us remember lived experiences and learn valuable lessons through it.

### Metaphoric Movement through Repetition

In my experience, repetition in movement is one of the clearest ways for me to communicate the essence of metaphor. As I see something, then see it again and again, I start to recollect, consciously or subconsciously, events that have happened in my past as they are extracted to the surface. I then generate a metaphor for and about the things that I am seeing based on those past experiences. As I started the process of my thesis, I was interested in unveiling what is below the surface or the essence of who we are. I had been struggling with this very thing and was looking for a way to break out of the self-doubt and cycle of constantly comparing myself now to who I was before my illness. I find it interesting that I used repetition in movement to break my cycle of dysfunctional repetitive behavior. I feel I was able to share not only the essence of specific movement through repetition but provide viewers an opportunity to divulge for themselves what the essence was for them personally, as it did for me.

Pina Bausch is iconic for the way she uses repetition to create personal understanding in choreography. Susan Kozel (1993), a performer, choreographer, and writer, says of Bausch: “Her work is merciless because it is so real. Being in the audience of a Bausch performance is participating in it. Her work is not removed from life; it is a part of life. It does not pretend, it is” (p. 49). I believe that her work provides the

opportunity to view ourselves in a very personal way because of the repetition. We see the essence of the movement and of ourselves. “When the essence of a being is found through examining itself, it requires critical thinking, creative thinking, and integrative thinking” (Denhart, 2006, p. 93). This is exactly what happened to me when viewing the repetition in *Grains of Time*; my consciousness tied most closely to my memories and past lived experiences and the trueness and essence of them were revealed to me through this process. “In the moment of repetition, the present is instantly recorded as the abstracted past. Repetition stimulates the recollection” (Rawle, 2009, p. 60).

Wilhelm Dilthey, a German philosopher, (as quoted in *Hermeneutics* by Michael Inwood, 1998) has suggested that,

A lived experience does not confront me as something perceived or represented; it is not given to me, but the reality of lived experience is there-for-me because I have a reflexive awareness of it, because I process it immediately as belonging to me in some sense. Only in thought does it become objective. (p. 229)

“A lived experience first of all has a temporal structure: it can never be grasped in its immediate manifestation but only reflectively as past presence” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 36). It can only be grasped in its full richness and depth through remembering and re-living it just as repetition suggests. Van Manen has also said, “Lived experience is the breathing of meaning” (p. 36). By giving lived experience memory, we are able to assign meaning to the phenomena of lived life. “We do this through meditations, conversations, daydreams, inspirations, and other interpretive acts [such as dance]” (p. 37).

It is my perception that repetition dismantles the conventions of dance as simply just movement and exposes it as a symbolic metaphoric language that is understood through deep connective watching. Historically, repetition in movement has been used to reach a level of ecstasy, trance, or a heightened state of consciousness.

German choreographer Pina Bausch used repetition as a device to communicate aggression and frustration. Bausch collaged fragments of dance, speech, and gesture with recorded music to create highly visual, postmodern performances. She relied heavily on the audience to give her work meaning, posing open questions that related to her obsessions. Bausch's choreographic talent was in layering. "Beginning with a simple movement, she drew out a hidden emotion and let it transform and distort the movement as it was repeated over and over again" (Fernandes, 2001, p. 80).

Bausch continually returns to the technique of concentrating on one essential image or gesture and probing it until it reveals the depth of its associations, its claim to power within the cultural imagination. The initial idea is pushed until even the structural grid which supports it, the foundational impetus for the work, takes on metaphoric value. (Climenhaga, 2009, p. 11)

In the solo "Grains of Time," I attempted to research this technique. I sought to engage the audience not as outside observers but participants in the metaphor of the movement. I wanted to erase the boundaries of the stage and bring the audience into a very personal understanding of the dance they were experiencing. As I approached my study and interpretation of repetition, I decided to use gesture that did not have emotional attachment: a small circling of the arm initiated at the shoulder that then evolves through its repetitive nature into a bigger circle including the upper torso and head. There is not a story, meaning, or emotion associated with the gesture but through the repetition of it, I began to see metaphor. It was this interest in the interpretation of the repetition of these gestures that led me to believe in repetition as a source for creating personal meaning and metaphor.

It is said of Bausch's work that:

It is not an invitation to escape from life, but to plunge even deeper into it...It is not a seamless and sculpted whole presented to a passive audience. Starting with

the daily social experiences of the body, she translates and alienates them into sequences of images and movement which only makes sense once the audience member relates to his or her personal physical experiences. [Her work] needs to be completed by each audience member's own thoughts and emotions. (Rawle 2009, p. 52)

Like this description of Bausch's work, I tried to invite others to, through the use of repetition, take a look at their lives, their lived experiences, and find the metaphors being presented to them individually.

An image, which could seem simply surreal or meaningless, becomes powerful once each person develops it with his or her own experiences. The inner experiences of the individual are invited to arise to the surface and engage with the spectacle on stage. The outcome is based on the experiences and understanding of each individual viewer. (Rawle, 2009, p. 52)

I strove to turn the gaze from the performer to the individual audience member, to take what was being said over and over again through the repetition on stage and discover what it meant to each of them because of their lived experiences. Van Manen (1990) claims that, "the nature and number of possible human experiences are as varied and infinite as human life itself" (p. 40). The ability to understand and find an answer to the repetition is the opening up, and keeping open, of possibilities. We can only do this if we can keep ourselves open in such a way that in this abiding concern of our questioning we find ourselves deeply interested in that which makes the question possible in the first place. "To truly question something is to interrogate something from the heart of our existence, from the center of our being" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 43).

Bausch herself has said,

Why do we dance in the first place? There is a great danger in the way things are developing at the moment and have been developing in the last few years. Everything has become routine and no one knows any longer why they're using these movements. All that's left is just a strange sort of vanity which is becoming more and more removed from actual people. And I believe that we ought to be getting closer to one another again. (as cited in Rawle, 2009, p. 55)

As I worked on my thesis, I experienced first-hand the development of a deep and meaningful relationship with myself that was created through the working process. I was re-introduced to who I was before my illness, someone that had been pushed to the background, and I was starting to see the essence of who I can be in the future. It has been anything but a meaningless process, as Bausch suggested. This process restored me to myself. I was no longer a stranger in my own skin; my identity was restored. I feel that because of the personal relationship rekindled within myself, the piece took on a power that otherwise would not have been there. I feel that it had the ability to connect people to themselves and each other.

Dance innovator Doris Humphrey said:

The human body is the most powerfully expressive medium there is. It is quite possible to hide behind words, or to mask facial expression. But the body reveals. Movement and gesture are the oldest language known to man. They are still the most revealing. When you move you stand revealed for what you are. (as cited in Denhart, 2006, p. 102)

After my experience creating *Grains of Time*, I discovered that it is not only through moving that things are revealed. When you see movement and you experience it over and over again, you can also stand revealed for who you truly are.

## CHAPTER 3

### A THOUSAND STEPS LED ME TO “GRAINS OF TIME”

#### My Creative Process

“Time provides the possibility for transformation, but only if we first transform time.”  
- Robert and Janet Denhardt

#### The Issue of Fear

In my opinion, fear either pushes you forward or holds you back. If you take it by the hand, it can lead you into uncharted waters where growth is inevitable. If you do not, you stand where you always stood and are who you always were. I was and still am fearful of repetition. In the past, most of my choreographic projects have been centered on more abstract ideas based on things such as emotions, stories, or current events. However, as I started this project, I had a mental, emotional, and creative block preventing me from tapping into those abstract ideas as I had done before. Time and time again, I found myself doubting my process and editing movement and sequences before they even really came to fruition. As the time approached for me to begin working on my thesis choreography, I again found myself doubting what I was creating. Therefore, I never really could dive into a process that would actually allow for discovery and the forming of a final product. I had a choice, I could either continue down the repetitive path of doing what I always did or I could face fear and try something new. It was a difficult

decision. Fear is overwhelming. I did not know if I could do something new and was frightened of failing. But I knew that I was and would continue failing if I stayed where I was. So, over the summer, I decided to go back to the basics of what makes up dance: time, space and energy. The most appealing element to me at that moment was time, perhaps because I was facing a deadline and knew that I could not fall into the cycle of destruction I had previously found myself in. I knew I would eventually have to produce a substantial piece of choreography and present it on stage. As I began to envision the choreography, I began to recall experiences from my past that included time and realized that the most prominent theme was that of repetition. I often fall into habits and repeat things in my life and knew that the element of time was what I was most familiar with. I decided that I would focus on how to present something, re-present it, and repeat it throughout the entire piece of choreography.

As I moved forward in this process, I found myself literally awakened by dreams about the possibilities of researching and developing my own understanding of repetition. For numerous nights in a row, my dreams included sand. I was startled by this image until I looked at my desk where I saw a small toy hourglass seeming to remind me that time is ever present and it is precious. I knew that I wanted to incorporate this idea in my choreography so my father and husband began constructing a contraption that would allow sand to fall from the ceiling into a container below as an abstracted idea representing the presence of time. I also played with the metaphor of time as a controlling, sometimes definite, element and constructed a circular barrier of sand inside of which my dancer would move.



Throughout all of this, I found myself on a precipice. I was staring fear directly in the face. These were uncharted waters. I had never before challenged myself in this way. It was invigorating but it was also terrifying. The creative process proved to be extremely difficult. I wavered between creating a piece that I felt would be accepted by the audience and choreographing true to my research on repetition. I was pulled between my inner desires to be accepted by my peers and the audience members, and being true to the power and simplicity of repetition. I was fearful that too much repetition would lose those in the audience not invested in the piece and too little repetition would not hold true to my research purpose. I constantly struggled with how to repeat without becoming redundant and asked myself, ‘when is enough enough?’ On the other hand, I found myself wanting to play it safe and repeat things a couple of times so the audience would understand where I was going but not get bored. Edith Bergstrom said, “The eye loves repetition, but does not want to be bored. It likes familiarity, but needs surprises” (as cited on [quote.robertgenn.com](http://quote.robertgenn.com)). Only after one of my first showings where my committee left wanting much more repetition, asking me to push it past the limit of comfortable repetition, encouraging me to be bold in my choices did I completely jump in and commit to using repetition fully. I committed myself to submerging my thoughts, movement, and ideas in repetition. Only then did I start to see and understand the metaphors repetition provided.

Martha Graham said, “When a plain walk is right and expresses everything that is to be expressed, more than a walk would be wrong” (as cited in Denhardt, 2006, p. 92). I agree with Graham on this point. Many people, accustomed to more elaborate and complex dramatic productions probably did not connect with the simplicity of my use of

repetition. My intent was to make things pure, to seek out the essence of the topic at hand, comprehending all of its complexity yet organizing and expressing it in a way that is clean and precise, comprehensible and understandable. Dance Educators Lynne Anne Blom and Tarin Chaplin, in Denhart's (2006) *The Dance of Leadership*, have written, "Some things are too simple for beginners – trying to get the essence of something is advanced work" (p. 92). The authors, Robert and Janet Denhart, have gone on to say,

That which looks simple and straightforward is often the result of an intense creative process in which ideas, impressions, and techniques bled in a most peculiar way to express something in a simple way that appears simple, but is perhaps better describes as "elemental" or "essential," in the sense of going to the essence of something. To engage in such an activity requires a thorough and complete understanding of the entire issue and the intellectual and artistic capacity to bring together the most meaningful patterns of thought and intention, so that the essential can be distilled from the complex. (p. 92)

This explains my process exactly. I buried myself in repetition. With trial and error, I was able to find the limit of when repetition becomes mundane and when it ignites something significant in the performer and the viewer. It was such a terrifying process not knowing if I would accomplish all I had set out to do or if I would fail. But that first step so many months ago set me forward on this journey and I feel blessed to have learned all that I did from them.

### Reading Gesture

I first became aware of repetition through various social interactions growing up. I found it intriguing to sit for hours watching classmates, strangers, friends, teachers, etc. speak to each other not only verbally but through gesture. Most of these gestures being used in these conversations already had words, meaning, and metaphor associated with them. I often wondered how they communicated this meaning and metaphor. Was it a

single moment that sealed the fate of a particular gesture or was it through the repetition and obsession with that gesture that ultimately gave it meaning and validity?

Professor of psychology and linguistics at University of Chicago, David McNeill (1992) suggests that people of all ages, cultures, and backgrounds gesture when they speak. Because gesture and speech temporally overlap but convey information in two different ways – speech is conventionalized and arbitrary, whereas gesture is idiosyncratic and imagistic – the two modalities capture and reflect different aspects of the unitary underlying cognitive process (McNeill). From personal experience, I have come to conclude that it is extremely important for my comprehension to use gesture while speaking. This is something most people have grown up understanding. However, through my involvement in dance, I began to find that we can make meaning from gesture without speech. Dance is a language wherein gesture and body movement has been used to convey meaning and metaphor. This has been and continues to be done in many different ways. I have viewed dances that have been completely filled with emblematic gestures, gestures we already recognize and comprehend but when put in a different context, take on new meaning. With this in mind, I began playing with gestures that may or may not have had previously associated meanings to me and began to discover through the repetition of those gestures how we derive our own meaning from metaphor.

Bernie Warren is a researcher, writer, and teacher of the arts. In his book, *Using the Creative Arts in Therapy*, he says,

The movements we initiate, the body shapes we form and the responses we present to external stimuli usually reflect our inner emotional state. The way we move, the way we stand, our gesture – all express (sometimes more accurately

than the words we speak) what we feel at any given moment; in essence they express the sub-text below our verbal communications. (1993, p. 59)

With these ideas in mind, I decided to focus the majority of *Grains of Time* around gesture. The basic form of the piece is three sections of gesture that are an incremental presentation of different utilizations of repetition. The first section of my piece focused around a simple hand gesture. Since I wanted to use sand to present the idea that time is ever present and often slips through our fingers, I used sand trickling from the hand as the first gesture. When experiencing sand dripping through my fingers, I felt a release of all the tension of holding my arm static. My arm automatically began to dangle and because of the effect of gravity, move in a small circular motion. This became the impetus for the beginning of my piece. I coached the dancer to improvise with building upon this simple movement, always returning to the pure gesture. Through the process of improvising or “playing” with this gesture, it built into a movement sequence that included not only the arm but a release into the legs and eventually the torso. The dancer continued to repeat this gesture for three minutes. This particular gestural repetition portrayed a myriad of powerful metaphors for me. The most present in my mind is the time just before my illness that I spent teaching in Mexico. I did not realize that the time I had planned on being there would be cut short and I would be yanked from the very thing that was bringing me pure happiness. The other experience is after treatment and surgeries, coming to the realization that I might not have physically been able to dance for the rest of my life. The time and effort I put into encouraging and progressing my dance career could be taken away in the blink of an eye. Through the repetition of this gesture and the metaphor of time slipping through my fingers, they eventually led me to understand more about myself and what I hold important.

The second section of repetition was built upon ten gestures that represented experiences during my time in graduate school. One example includes a gathering of all limbs inward to then burst them all back out again, representing the desire to turn inward and retract from certain experiences only to be immediately pulled in multiple directions all at the same time. These 10 gestures were layered into a phrase that I began pulling apart and restructuring to form an even longer phrase. I continued with this method, deconstructing gesture upon gesture, until I had a full section of 10 gestures strung together in various repetitive sequences. This was one of the most difficult sections for my dancer as she not only had to remember the gestures but where they came in the entire sequence. However, for me, I began to realize that the experience of my illness and the implications shared earlier in the introduction continued to pop up in different moments of my life where and when I least expected them. Our lives are messy and unpredictable. If we try to memorize or project upon ourselves where we will end up and how we will get there, we lose the possibility of surprising ourselves and enjoying the spontaneity that is life. This metaphor emerged through the experience of using repetition in this unadorned way.

The third method of repetition was the easiest and most personal. As mentioned earlier, my experience in graduate school has had its ups and down. I felt like I was walking in circles. As I continued to do so both physically and metaphorically, it struck me with such force one day that I knew I could not end my piece in any other way than walking in circles. Therefore, my dancer did just that, she walked in circles, erupting from a frenzy of gestures and continued to accelerate in her pace and breathing until she felt she had fully lived what she had just experienced on stage. Only then did she begin to

slow her pace and settle into a circling and eventual stepping out of the physical circle on stage. I felt this was the perfect metaphor on which to end the piece. It could be viewed as a new beginning and emergence into new possibilities or a new phase of life. On the other hand, it could be viewed as the end of a long and fulfilled experience, stepping out and finishing an existence. Either way, because of the repetition of the movement, each individual audience member was given the opportunity to divulge the metaphor for themselves based on their personal lived experiences.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

#### Impact and Integration

“Movement has the capacity to take us to the home of the soul.”  
-Anna Halprin

“Movement reaches our deepest nature, and dance creatively expresses it.

Through dance, we can gain new insights into the mystery of our inner lives“ (Halprin, 2002, p. i). These words are powerful and resonate with me. In my experiences of viewing repetition in *Grains of Time*, no story line was told. No clear conclusion was made. It was purely about the repetition of the gestures and how they could create individual metaphor and meaning. I felt it was like I was spying on myself as the repetition reverberated within me, echoing the inner metaphors of my soul. In my opinion, our souls are filled with layers and layers of thoughts, memories, and understandings that through repetition are peeled back and who you are and what you think are truly revealed. Repetition is not a re-presentation but allows for the reinvention of an idea that then allows us to revisit experiences from our past.

The metaphors revealed to me through repetition are personal and poignant. In the first few seconds of the piece, I felt the primary inklings of understanding and self-revelation as the stirring of the dancer’s hand stirs something unconscious within me. It

continued on as I came to the realization that the dancer never circles counterclockwise. The personal metaphor inherent within me suggests that she is continually addressing and questioning the trial or the obstacle in her way. I learned that I too must face, head on, those things that frighten me, humble me, and sometimes even crumble me. If I continue to tackle them, I will eventually come out whole. I feel that this is what I did with the cycle of dysfunctional repetition in my life. Unknown to me at the beginning of this process, I found that I was in control of who I am and what I am capable of doing. The repetition of the sand falling in the background was a metaphor of time passing, sometimes comprehensible and sometimes secondary to other issues we are faced with. I realized that not everything can be accomplished on my time table. I must give time for things to evolve and grow to a point where they will benefit me the most. Life is not a fairytale in the sense of “happily ever after.” It is the fairytale we make it with each challenge, obstacle, and hardship if we allow those inevitable parts of the creative process and our lives to teach us and make us better people.

One of the most delicious metaphors for me came as the dancer circled round and round. My mind and soul started to understand that she was not being controlled and contained by time as I first concluded. She was in fact mastering it. She was taking control of and manipulating it. *She* made the decision to slow down and step away from it. She relinquished the control it once appeared to have on her and stepped out. This is exactly what I did in this thesis process. I made the decision to use an element of time, the very thing that had been controlling my actions and producing such fear, as a way to break out of that dysfunctional repetitive cycle. This experience allowed me to take



control of something that I felt had control over me. My illness does not control me today the way it did for 5 years. I have power over the outcome. I have power over myself.

This piece, although not initially conceived to do so, was a reflection of my own journey over these past few years. There were triumphs and there were failures. I felt that I was in a repetitive cycle of ups and downs. I find it fitting that focusing on repetition broke the repetitive cycle of fear, failure, and past perceptions of who I could have been. It has given me the tools to push forward and help others on their own path of self-discovery. I feel that I am a much stronger teacher, mover, and woman because of this process. I understand fear and how to approach and help others who are being controlled by it. I also feel that I will truly be an educator because of this process. Through this thesis process, I have come to realize the importance of living in the moment, to really be me in the now. It makes life a joy and an excitement when you embrace what is happening within you and around you in the present. That is a valuable lesson for me and for my future students. I will be able to go into the classroom and teach things that I have experienced first-hand. I hope to be able to share my experiences and my personal life metaphors I have learned and encourage others to do the same.

Going into this process, I thought I was constructing a piece based on the fundamentals of dance but as I continued down the path, I began to realize that it was much more personal and central to my soul, which is why I believe it was a successful process. It was not about trivial or forced subject matters; it was about the matters of my heart

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